One Shot

Pipa Rat

By ZAODAO

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Pipa Rat

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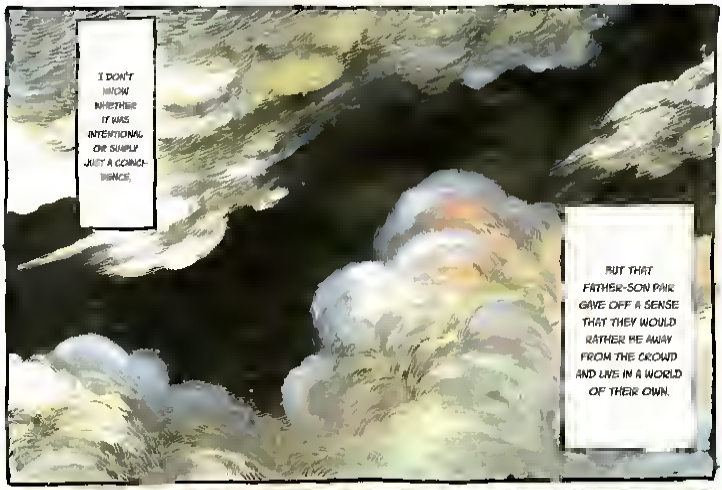
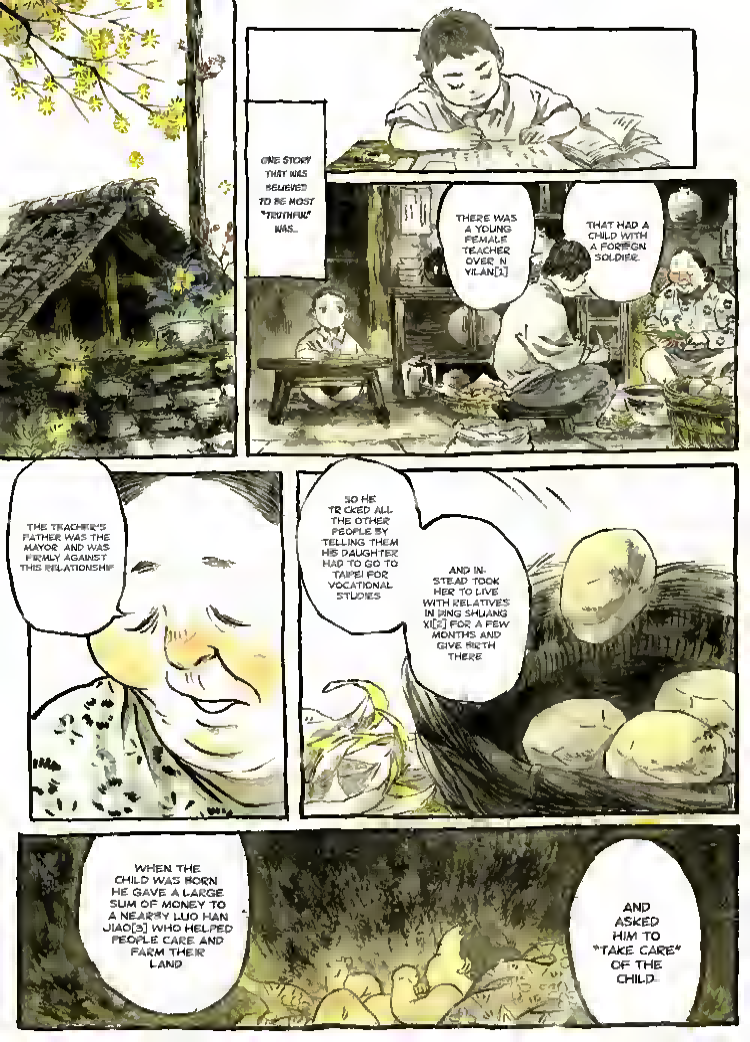

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER IT WAS INTENTIONAL OR SIMPLY JUST A COINCIDENCE,
BUT THAT FATHER-SON PAIR GAVE OFF A SENSE THAT THEY WOULD RATHER BE AWAY FROM THE CROWD AND LIVE IN A WORLD OF THEIR OWN.

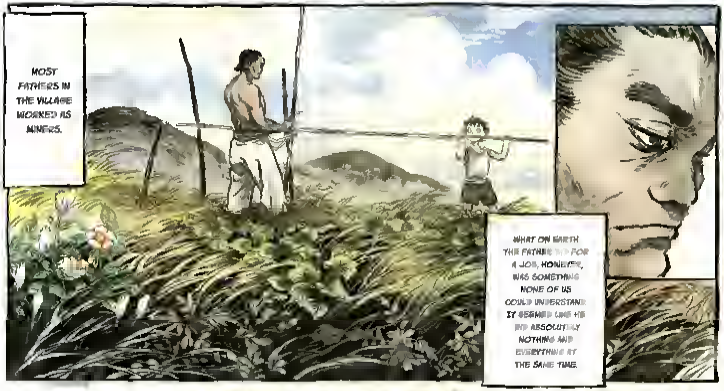
OUR VILLAGE WAS LOCATED IN A MOUNTAIN VALLEY WITH MOST HOUSES BEING BUILT ON THE HILLSIDES THAT FACED TOWARDS THE SUN
IN CONTRAST, THEY CHOSE TO LIVE IN THE VALLEY ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE, WHERE SUNLIGHT DID NOT SHINE UNTIL THE AFTERNOON.

THE SON SEEMED TO BE AROUND MY AGE
BUT I WAS ALREADY IN 3RD GRADE, WHEREAS HE HAD NEVER BEEN TO SCHOOL.
BARK!!
EVERY TIME I SAW HIM, HE WAS LEADING ALL SORTS OF DOGS AND WANDERING AROUND ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

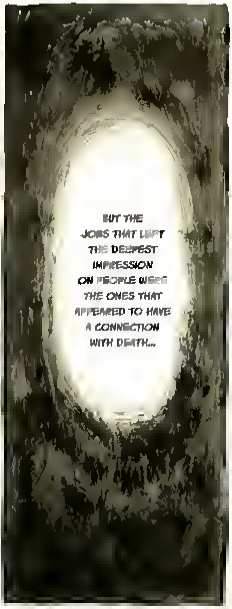
HE DIDN'T LOOK LIKE HIS FATHER AT ALL,
AND IT MAY HAVE BEEN TO THIS GREAT DIFFERENCE IN THEIR APPEARANCES THAT RUMOURS AND GOSSIP ABOUT THE SON'S ORIGINS WERE SO COMMON..

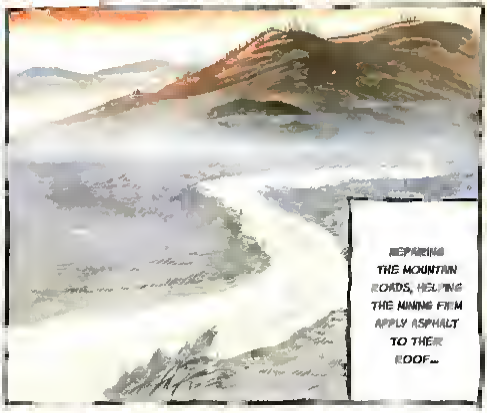

ONE STORY THAT WAS BELIEVED TO BE MOST "TRUTHFUL" WAS...
THERE WAS A YOUNG FEMALE TEACHER OVER N YILAN[1]
THAT HAD A CHILD WITH A FOREIGN SOLDIER
THE TEACHER'S FATHER WAS THE MAYOR AND WAS FIERCELY AGAINST THIS RELATIONSHIP
SO HE TRICKED ALL THE OTHER PEOPLE BY TELLING THEM HIS DAUGHTER HAD TO GO TO TAIPEI FOR VOCATIONAL STUDIES
AND INSTEAD TOOK HER TO LIVE WITH RELATIVES IN PING SHUJING XI[2] FOR A FEW MONTHS AND GIVE BIRTH THERE
WHEN THE CHILD WAS BORN HE GAVE A LARGE SUM OF MONEY TO A NEARBY LUO HAN JIAO[3] WHO HELPED PEOPLE CARE AND FARM THEIR LAND
AND ASKED HIM TO "TAKE CARE" OF THE CHILD

THE LUO HAN JIAO, UPON SEEING HOW PITIABLE AND HOW ADORABLE THE CHILD WAS, DECIDED TO TAKE THE CHILD IN AS HIS OWN INSTEAD.
HE LEFT FANG SHUANG XI WITH THE CHILD AND WORKED HERE AND THERE IN ORDER TO SURVIVE.
OF COURSE, THIS STORY HAD NEVER BEEN CONFIRMED
BUT IT GAVE A REASON WHY THE SON DIDN'T GO TO SCHOOL.
HE HAD NO WAY OF BEING OFFICIALLY REGISTERED...


MOST FATHERS IN THE VILLAGE WORKED AS MINERS.
WHAT ON EARTH THE FATHER IS FOR A JOB, HONESTLY, WAS SOMETHING NONE OF US COULD UNDERSTAND. IT SEEMED LIKE HE DID ABSOLUTELY NOTHING AND EVERYTHING AT THE SAME TIME.

FOR EXAMPLE, CARRYING THE TIMBER AND RAIL TRACKS THEY HAD TO USE IN THE MINING PITS...


BUT THE JOBS THAT LEFT THE DEEPEST IMPRESSION ON PEOPLE WERE THE ONES THAT APPEARED TO HAVE A CONNECTION WITH DEATH...

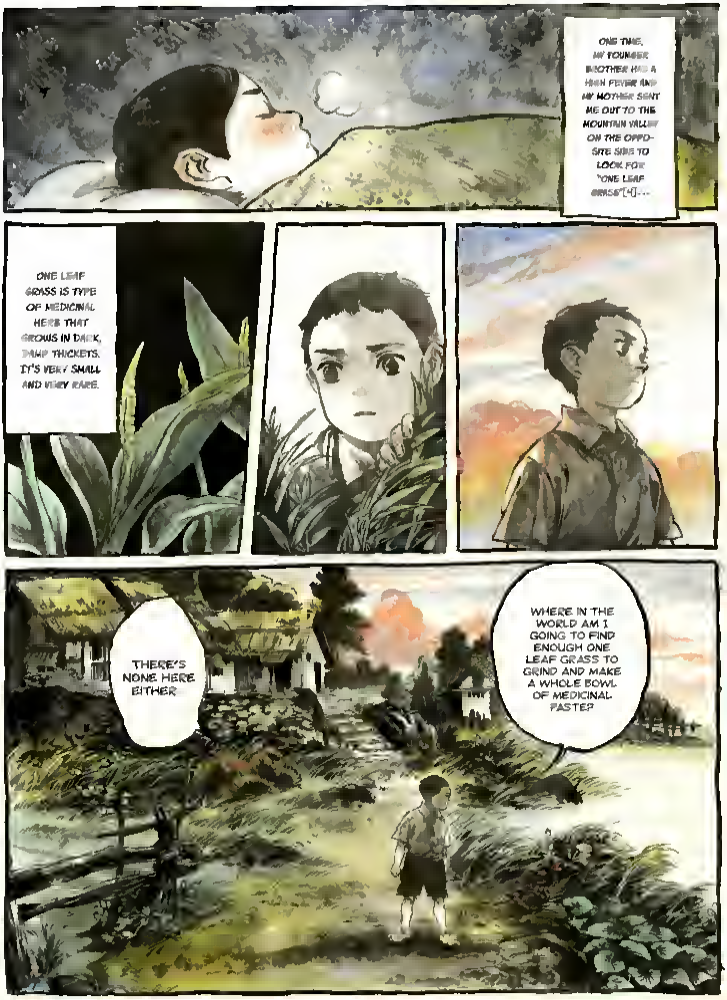

REPAIRING THE MOUNTAIN ROADS, HELPING THE MINING FIRM APPLY ASPHALT TO THEIR ROOF...

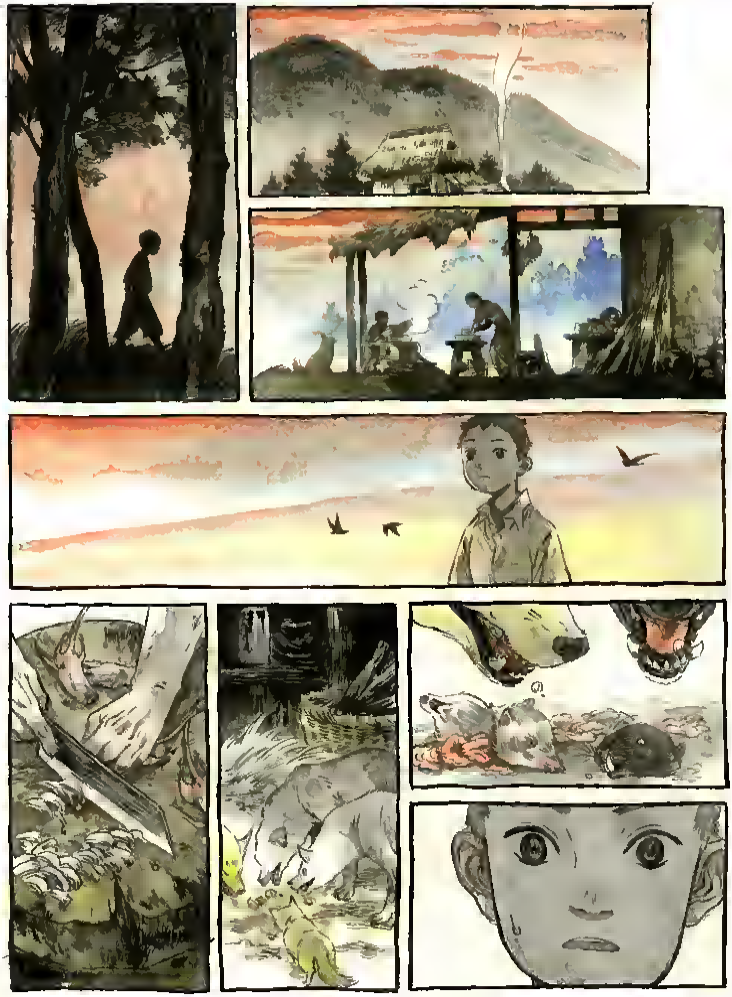
FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN SOMEONE FELL TO THEIR DEATH IN THE MOUNTAIN VALLEYS AND THEIR CORPSE HAD TO BE CARRIED BACK UP...
OR WHEN SOMEONE HUNG THEMSELVES UP IN THE MOUNTAINS AND THEIR BUG-INFESTED CORPSE HAD TO BE DEALT WITH...
EVEN WHEN A CHILD DIED PREMATURELY AND A PLACE TO BURY THEM HAD TO BE FOUND, THIS PERSON PEOPLE THOUGHT OF FIRST WAS ALWAYS HIM.
NO ONE SEEMED TO BE SURE ABOUT HIS ORIGINAL NAME AND NO ONE CARED ABOUT IT EITHER;
ALL OF US SIMPLY REFERRED TO HIM AS "PAT".
AS FOR HIS SON, NATURALLY HE WAS REFERRED TO AS "PATLING"

ANOTHER STRANGE THING ABOUT THAT FATHER-SON PAIR WAS THAT THEY SEEMED TO EAT ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING...
!
!?

EVER SINCE THAT TIME SOMEONE FOUND EATING BONE THROUGH VARIOUS TRIALS AND HARDSHIPS CLIMBING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY
TO SEARCH FOR THE DEAD CHICKEN SOMEONE HAD THROWN INTO THE THICKETS SO THAT HE COULD BRING IT BACK TO EAT...
WHENEVER SOMEONE IN THE VILLAGE HAD A DEAD CHICKEN OR DEAD DUCK, THEY WOULD TURN TOWARDS THAT SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN AND CALL OUT...
RAT!
THERE'S A DEAD CHICKEN! DO YOU WANT TO TAKE IT AND FRY IT WITH SOME SHREDDED GINGER?
THE VILLAGERS MEANT NOTHING DEMEANING BY THIS. RATHER, IT WAS MEANT AS A KIND OF REPAYMENT
THIS WAS BECAUSE RAT WAS LEARNED IN HERBAL MEDICINES...
IF THEY WERE EVER POISONED OR BITTEN BY A SNAKE, PEOPLE WOULD ALWAYS GO TO HIM FOR HELP WITH HERBAL MEDICINES.

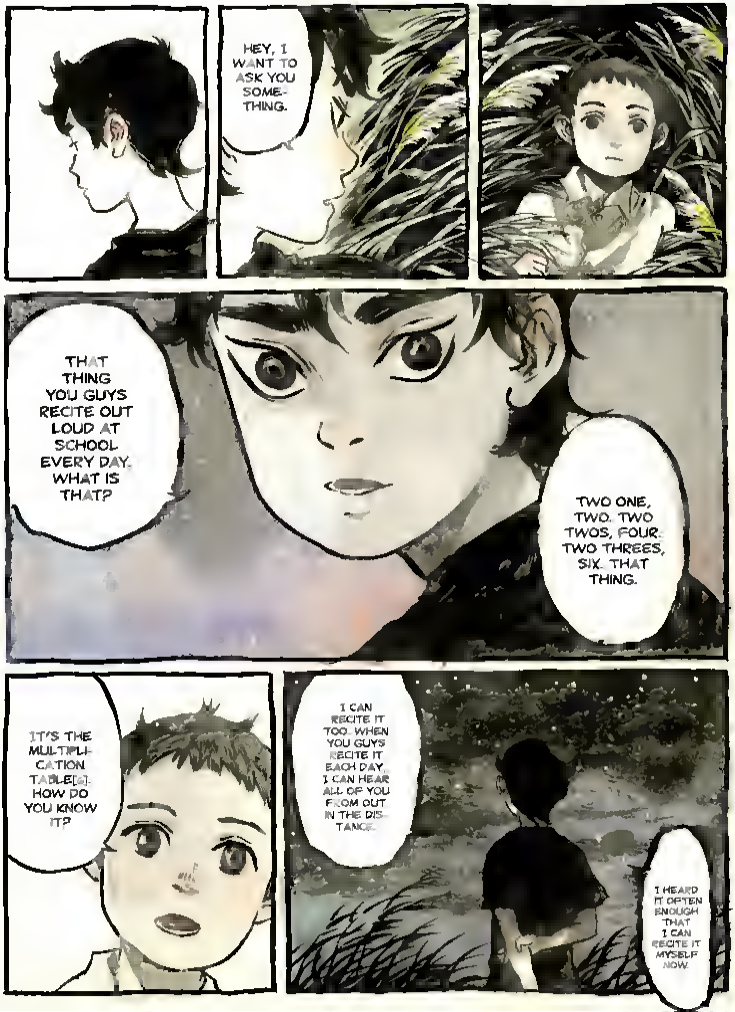
THOSE HERBAL MEDICINES WERE LIKE "SECRET RECIPES" FOR ME.
HE WOULD GATHER THE HERBS HIMSELF, THEN GRIND AND CHOP THEM UP SO THAT NO ONE COULD TELL WHAT THEY WERE.
I'M TROUBLING YOU ALL THE TIME. PLEASE, TAKE THIS...
WHY ARE YOU GIVING THE MONEY TO ME?
GIVE IT TO THE MOUNTAIN GOD!
THESE HERBS WERE ALL BESTOWED UPON US BY HIM!

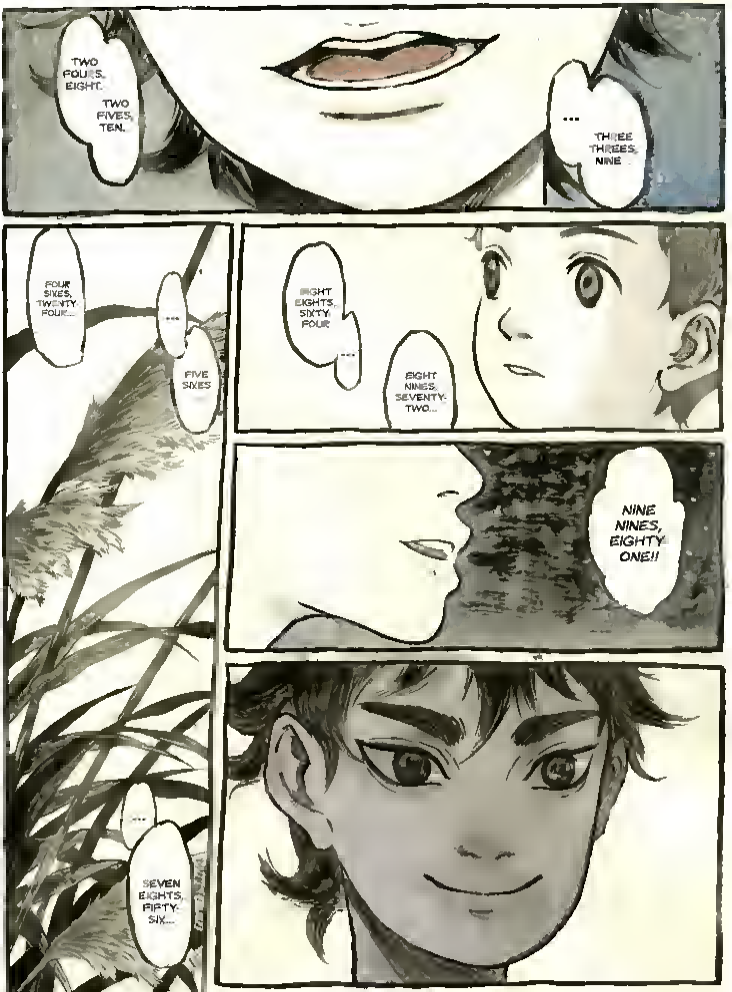

ONE TIME, MY YOUNGER BROTHER HAD A HIGH FEVER AND MY MOTHER SENT ME OUT TO THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE TO LOOK FOR "ONE LEAF GRASS"[4]...
ONE LEAF GRASS IS TYPE OF MEDICINAL HERB THAT GROWS IN DARK, DAMP THICKETS. IT'S VERY SMALL AND VERY RARE.
THERE'S NONE HERE EITHER.
WHERE IN THE WORLD AM I GOING TO FIND ENOUGH ONE LEAF GRASS TO GRIND AND MAKE A WHOLE BOWL OF MEDICINAL PASTE?

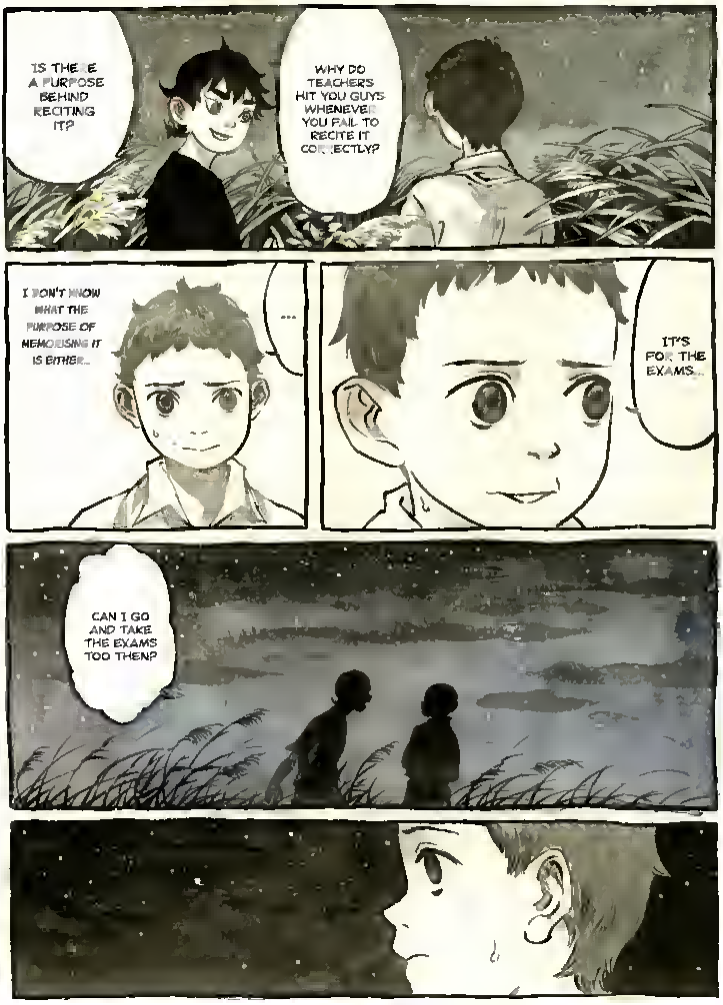


WHAT ARE DOING OUT SO LATE?
MY YOUNG BROTHER HAS A FEVER. I NEED TO FIND SOME ONE LEAF GRASS...
IT'S GOING TO BE DARK SOON. WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO SEARCH?
THE PLACES WHERE YOU'LL BE ABLE TO FIND ONE LEAF GRASS GROWING ARE ESPECIALLY FULL OF SNAKES TOO...
YOUR PARENTS ARE BEING SUCH STRANGER[S]. THEY COULD HAVE JUST CALLED OUT TO ME FROM THE OPPOSITE SIDE INSTEAD OF SENDING OUT A YOUNG CHILD LIKE YOURSELF OUT ON HIS OWN.
DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU CAN FIND ONE LEAF GRASS?
OF COURSE I DO!

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, THEN?
LET'S GO.

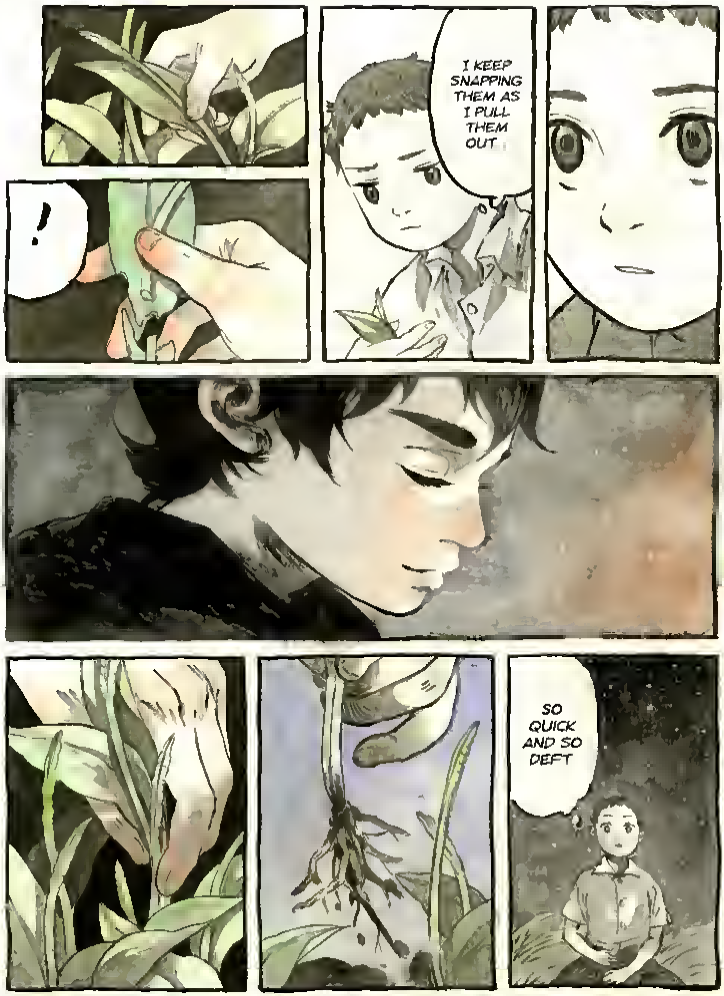

HEY, I WANT TO ASK YOU SOME-THING.
THAT THING YOU GUYS RECITE OUT LOUD AT SCHOOL EVERY DAY. WHAT IS THAT?
TWO ONE, TWO. TWO TWOS, FOUR. TWO THREES, SIX. THAT THING.
IT'S THE MULTIPLI-CATION TABLE[a]. HOW DO YOU KNOW IT?
I CAN RECITE IT TOO. WHEN YOU GUYS RECITE IT EACH DAY, I CAN HEAR ALL OF YOU FROM OUT IN THE DIS-TANCE.
I HEARD IT OFTEN ENOUGH THAT I CAN RECITE IT MYSELF NOW.


TWO FOURES, EIGHT.
TWO FIVES, TEN.
...
THREE THREES, NINE...
FOUR SIXES, TWENTY-FOUR...
...
FIVE SIXES
EIGHT EIGHTS, SIXTY-FOUR
...
EIGHT NINES, SEVENTY-TWO...
NINE NINES, EIGHTY-ONE!!
...
SEVEN EIGHTS, FIFTY-SIX...


IS THERE A PURPOSE BEHIND RECITING IT?
WHY DO TEACHERS HIT YOU GUYS WHENEVER YOU FAIL TO RECITE IT CORRECTLY?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE PURPOSE OF MEMORISING IT IS EITHER...
...
IT'S FOR THE EXAMS...
CAN I GO AND TAKE THE EXAMS TOO THEN?

I'M JUST KIDDING.
YOU HAVE TO STUDY AT A SCHOOL IN ORDER TO TAKE EXAMS!

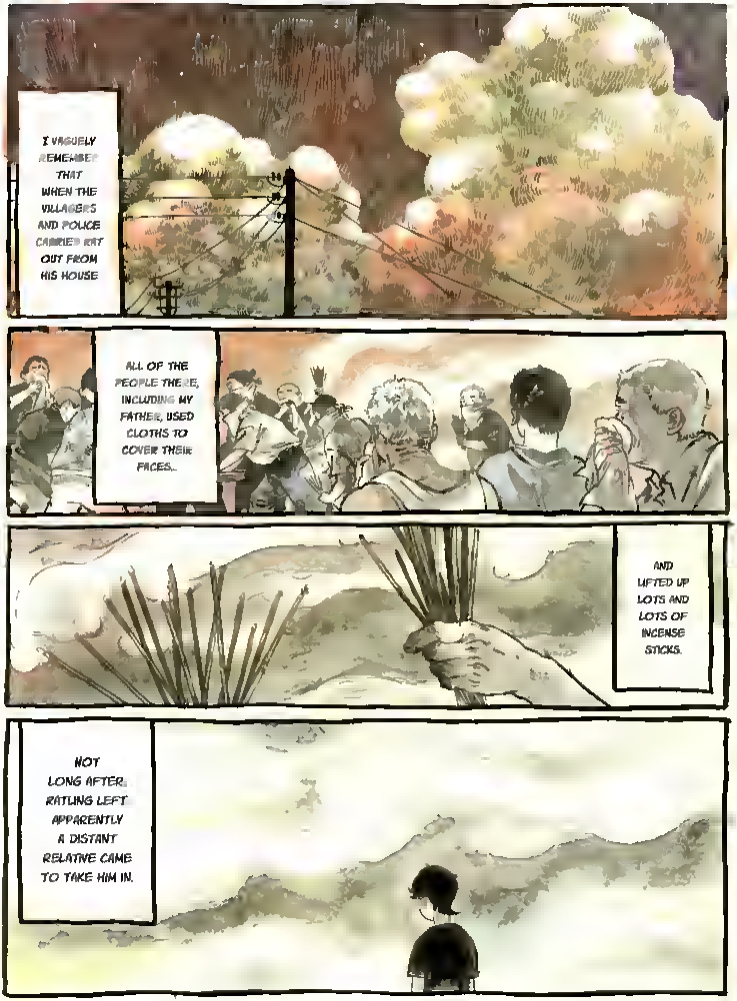
ONE LEAF GRASS!


I KEEP SNAPPING THEM AS I PULL THEM OUT.
!
SO QUICK AND SO DEFT

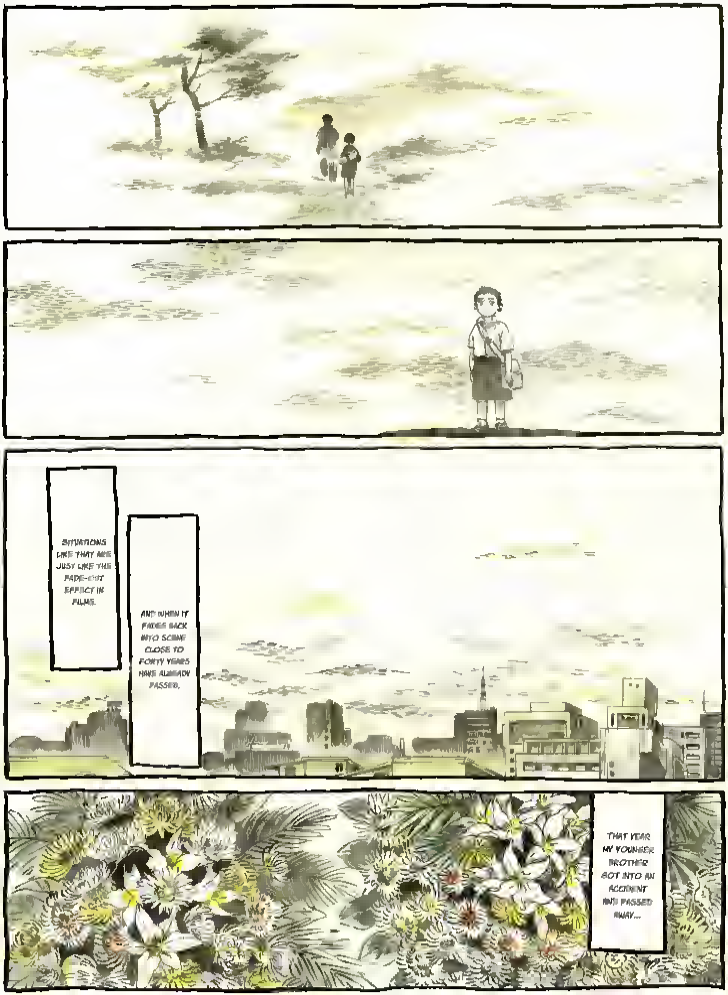
DAD~
DO YOU WANT TO EAT WITH US?
TONIGHT WE HAVE SOME RAT MEAT STIR FRIED WITH BLACK BEANS!
THAT WAS THE LAST TIME I SAW HIM

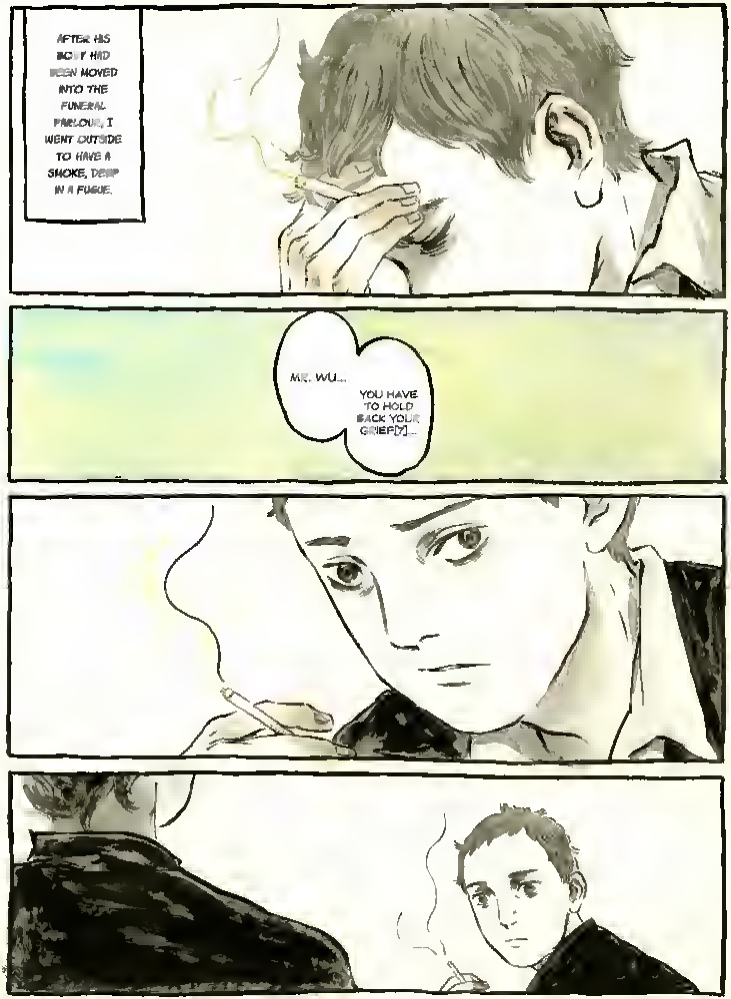
HALF A YEAR LATER, AT DUSK ON A PARTICULAR DAY, SONSONE WALKED PAST RIT'S HOUSE...
HOW CAN YOUR DAD LET YOU KILL SNAKES ON YOUR OWN? ISN'T HE AFRAID THAT YOU'LL BE BITTEN?

DAD'S SLEEPING!
DAD'S SLEEPING SO DEEPLY THAT BUGS HAVE STARTED TO CRAWL ONTO HIM! HE WON'T WAKE UP WHEN I CALL FOR HIM EITHER!
!


I VAGUELY REMEMBER THAT WHEN THE VILLAGERS AND POLICE CARRIED RAT OUT FROM HIS HOUSE
ALL OF THE PEOPLE THERE, INCLUDING MY FATHER, USED CLOTHS TO COVER THEIR FACES...
AND LIFTED UP LOTS AND LOTS OF INCENSE STICKS.
NOT LONG AFTER, RATLING LEFT. APPARENTLY A DISTANT RELATIVE CAME TO TAKE HIM IN.

THERE WAS A PACK RUN AND JUST LIKE THAT I'M LEFT
I WAS ON MY WAY BACK FROM SCHOOL WHEN, JUST AS IT HAPPENED, I CROSSED THAT LINE'S PATH
NINE EIGHTY-SEVEN TWO.
NINE NINE-S EIGHTY ONE!

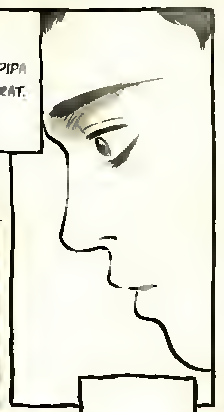

SITUATIONS LIKE THAT ARE JUST LIKE THE FADE-OUT EFFECT IN FILMS.
AND WHEN IT FADES BACK INTO SCENE CLOSE TO FORTY YEARS HAVE ALREADY PASSED.
THAT YEAR MY YOUNGER BROTHER GOT INTO AN ACCIDENT AND PASSED AWAY...

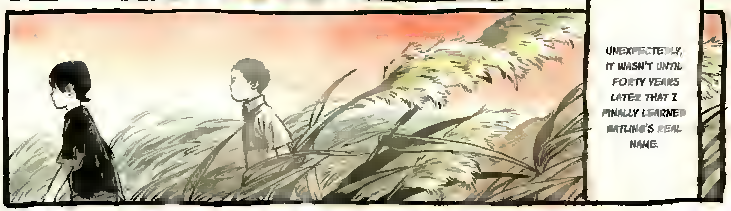

AFTER HIS BODY HAD BEEN MOVED INTO THE FUNERAL PARLOUR, I WENT OUTSIDE TO HAVE A SMOKE, DEEP IN A FUGUE.
MR. WU...
YOU HAVE TO HOLD BACK YOUR GRIEF[Y]...

I KNOW YOU. WHEN WE WERE YOUNG,
WE WENT TO PICK SOME ONE LEAF GRASS TOGETHER.
BUT
YOU MIGHT NOT REMEMBER THAT

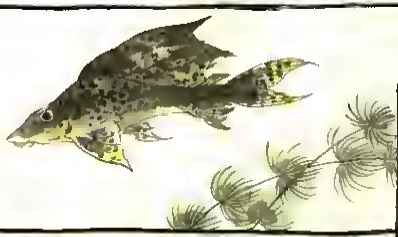
HE HANDED ME A NAME CARD, THEN QUIETLY WALKED AWAY.

IN PARENTHESES, UNDERNEATH HIS NAME AND TITLE AS THE MANAGER OF THE FUNERAL PARLOUR, WAS HIS NICKNAME.


PIPA RAT.


UNEXPECTEDLY, IT WASN'T UNTIL FORTY YEARS LATER THAT I FINALLY LEARNED BATLING'S REAL NAME.

AFTER EVEN MORE TIME HAD GONE BY, WHEN I TOLD THEM THIS STORY, MY FRIENDS SAID TO ME: "A "PIPA RAT"[2] IS A TYPE OF FISH..."



PEOPLE FAMILIAR WITH RAISING FISH KNOW THAT, ALTHOUGH IT'S NOT THE STAR OF A FISH TANK, IT'S SOME THING THAT ABSOLUTELY CANNOT BE LEFT OUT

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TRANSLATOR NOTES:
SIMPLIFIED CHINESE/TRADITIONAL CHINESE

[1] 宜蘭/宜蘭 YILAN IS THE NAME OF A COUNTY/CITY IN TAIWAN.

[2] 頂双溪/頂雙溪 DING SHUANG XI IS THE OLD NAME FOR SHUANGXI, A RURAL DISTRICT IN THE NEW TAIPEI CITY MUNICIPALITY. TAIPEI, THE CITY, IS CONSIDERED ITS OWN MUNICIPALITY AND IS AN ENCLAVE (I.E. SURROUNDED) OF THE NEW TAIPEI CITY MUNICIPALITY.

[3] 罗汉脚/羅漢腳 LUO HAN JIAO, LITERALLY ARHAT FOOT, WAS A TERM USED IN TAIWAN DURING THE QING DYNASTY TO REFER TO MEN WHO HAD NO PLACE TO LIVE, NO WIFE, AND DID NOT HAVE ANY OF THE FOUR OCCUPATIONS (SCHOLAR, FARMER, CRAFTSMAN/ARTISAN, MERCHANT/TRADER). IT IS NOW MORE COMMONLY USED TO REFER TO MIDDLE-AGED MEN WHO HAVEN'T BEEN MARRIED YET.

[4] 一叶草/一葉草 YI YE CAO, LITERALLY ONE LEAF GRASS, IS ONE OF THE MANY CHINESE NAMES USED TO REFER TO ADDER'S TONGUES (THE FERN).

[5] 太见外/太見外 I.E. THEY WERE BEING OVERLY CONSIDERATE, ALMOST AS IF THEY WERE COMPLETE STRANGERS TO ONE ANOTHER. A SOMEWHAT RELATED PHRASE IN ENGLISH WOULD "DON'T BE A STRANGER".

[6] 九九乘法表 LITERALLY NINE NINE MULTIPLICATION TABLE, WHICH IS WHY RATLING ENDED HIS RECITATION AT "NINE NINES, EIGHTY-ONE!"

[7] 节哀/節哀 A CHINESE CONDOLENCE PHRASE. IT MEANS "TO HOLD BACK/RESTRAIN GRIEF", BASICALLY TO NOT LET YOUR GRIEF SHOW AND OVERCOME YOU.

[8] 琵琶鼠 PI PA SHU, LITERALLY PIPA RAT, IS ONE OF THE MANY CHINESE NAMES USED TO REFER TO THE SUCKERMOUTH CATFISH/COMMON PLECO.